

Prison inmates earn degrees, confidence through Indiana State program

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"Offenders who participate in these ISU programs not only improve their minds and chances for employment when they are released, but their whole attitude and outlook on life is healthier."

Commissioner, J. David Donahue

By Katie Spanuello/ISU media relations assistant director

CARLISLE — The first time David P. Davis wrote a poem was from a prison cell in the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility in Carlisle at the age of 38.

The poem was an assignment for English 219, a creative writing class he was taking through Indiana State University's Corrections Education Program. Never having written creatively before, no one was more surprised than Davis when he was told that his poem, "Ode to the Man," was selected for publication in "Tonic," the literary magazine of Arion, ISU's student writing club.

"I would have never in a million years thought that I had any type of a talent for writing. This is all news to me," Davis said. "I've always been intimidated by writing an essay or a poem. We were given the parameters and I just went ahead with it to try to fulfill the requirements of the assignment."

Davis is one of about 350 place-bound students at correctional facilities in Carlisle, Plainfield, Putnamville and Rockville, who are earning their associate's or bachelor's degrees through ISU's program.

With 50 instructors; 12 to 16 proctors; and about 120 sections, or class periods, every semester, Kathleen White, interim director of ISU's Corrections Education Program, has seen what a difference the program makes in the lives of the students.

"We see our students going from individuals who have anger issues, no self-esteem and never had success or very little success; who now are graduating with self-confidence, realizing what it takes to get along with their fellow man," White said. "In addition to picking up academic knowledge, in many cases, their educational accomplishments have helped them stay out of prison after they re-enter society."

Statistics from the Indiana Department of Correction show that this is true. About 40 percent of prison inmates in Indiana are back behind bars within three years of their release, but this is not true of inmates who earn college degrees.

According to the department's Planning & Research Division, the overall recidivism rate for Indiana in 2002 was 39.3 percent. For those offenders who received a time cut for achieving an associate's degree, however, the recidivism rate in 2002 was 18.4 percent. For those who earned a bachelor's degree, it was 18 percent.

Commissioner J. David Donahue says that ISU's Corrections Education Program is benefiting the state by helping the Department of Correction in its mission to return offenders to the community as law-abiding citizens.

"The educational programs and opportunities for advanced degrees provided by Indiana State University to our offenders are an important component in our campaign to reduce the recidivism rate in Indiana," Donahue said. "Offenders who participate in these ISU programs not only improve their minds and chances for employment when they are released, but their whole attitude and outlook on life is healthier."

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